Heinrich Popitz's Phenomena of Power

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Abstract
Given the new translation of Heinrich Popitz's book into English, it is perhaps appropriate to structure remarks around some comparisons to leading figures in Anglophone discussions of power. It is these discussions that will hopefully be invigorated by an infusion of Popitz's approach that the new translation will afford. I will start by drawing comparisons specifically to Steven Lukes, Michael Mann, and Dennis Wrong, exploring the fundamental divisions or "building blocks" of each one's theory of power in contrast to Popitz's. From this basis I will focus on three prominent themes in *Phenomena of Power*: "fear", "recognition", and "domination" (or the rule of the many by the few), themes which continue to invite comparisons and reflections on the distinctive nature of Popitz's contribution.

Fundamental Divisions

Much is determined by how one initially 'slices the conceptual cake' when taking an approach to power. Any definition of power has to begin with its basic duality – as the capacity to do things, and as the control of some over others. Popitz begins from the premises that power is humanly made, ubiquitous, and that 'All exercise of power is a limitation of freedom', and thus needs 'justification'. It is clear that, for Popitz, the reason we need to understand power is because humans don't just have power, they have power over each other.

This shows through in his four 'basic anthropological forms of power'. In formulating the 'power of action', he focuses not just on agency, but on the capacity to harm, to do violence. Power over others is possible because humans are susceptible to physical and psychological injury. The next form he calls 'instrumental power', by which he means the capacity for some to manipulate others through rewards and punishments, thereby steering their behaviour in desired ways. In narrow compass, instrumental power motivates people towards immediate goals, but more broadly it plays on people's hopes and fears, of rewards and punishments imagined. Then comes 'authoritative power', which also steers behaviour, but does so through the internalisation of norms, which, in turn, impinge on matters of self-esteem. We both internalise values that orient actions, and desire to be perceived accordingly as good, and not bad. Finally, the 'power of data constitution' introduces the material element, the ways people are controlled not just by rewards, threats and internalised values, but by the material construction of environments and their capacities to direct and control behaviour. Together these four forms constitute the building blocks of Popitz's approach to power. They suggest a sequence of the elaboration of control, from the most basic and direct fear of personal harm, on up to the very material conditioning of action.

By contrast, consider Lukes' (2005) well-known three dimensions of power – his building blocks. He builds up a contrast between: (1) explicit public contests of power,

typically in the context of democratic decision making (first dimension); (2) the control of agenda setting and the terms of public debate (second dimension); and (3) preference shaping – the formation of wants and desires in such a way that they serve the interests of the powerful, in ways largely unknown by those whose preferences have been shaped (third dimension). Clearly this last has something in common with what Popitz means by 'authoritative power'. However, with Lukes, the underlying image is one of the progressive concealment of power interests, rather than the elaboration of threat and control. The underlying power problem is more one of consciousness than of susceptibility to harm.

Mann's (1986) famous model of four sources of social power provides a different contrast. Mann treats power primarily as an effect of social organisation and the way it increases the capacity for action. He proposes a framework in which power across different times and places can be analysed into four primary kinds of social organisations and networks: Ideological, Economic, Military, and Political (his 'IEMP Model'). The image is of a macro division of labour characterised by interdependence, despite conflicts among its major parts. The capacity to do things, and the tendency towards domination and control, are entwined in Mann's model. Popitz's, on the other hand, tends to take the former for granted, foregrounding the later.

Perhaps Wrong (2002), similarly inspired by Weber, displays the greatest similarity to Popitz. Wrong divides the basic subject matter into: force, manipulation, persuasion and authority, suggesting ever more refined and subtle mechanisms for directing social action in that series. But he pays particular attention to the last of these – authority. Wrong's broad concept of authority draws on Weber's *Herrschaft,* combining what, in English, are normally distinguished as authority versus domination. Thus authority, for him, includes legitimated commands, competent expertise, and personal standing, but also the motivation of action through coercion and inducement. For Wrong, such actions are also responses to authoritative commands, whatever the roles of fear and self-interest in provoking them. Wrong begins with the basic concept of power as 'the capacity of some persons to produce intended and foreseen effects on others' (p. 2), so while the undertone of fear and pressure is not as strong as with Popitz, nonetheless his approach shares with Popitz the basic image of some producing effects on others, of social control. One might say, with some subtlety, that Wrong asks 'why do we follow?', whereas Popitz's question is 'how are we led?'.

The point of these brief comparisons is simply to suggest how Popitz might fit into and contrast with predominant Anglophone treatments of power, which have tended to treat power more as a system property to be analysed, and less as an aspect of human nature with unfolding implications. In Popitz's view, humans are particularly susceptible to power; they have a weakness for it. While he clearly sees the dangers of power (also for obvious biographical reasons), it is treated as an existential condition, a basic human liability. I would venture that, in the Anglophone tradition, power has more often been treated as a moral problem to be explained (e.g. Lukes) or a matter of accurate description (e.g. Mann). This is, of course, a distinction of degrees, not absolute. But I think some sensitivity to it helps us think about what the translation of Popitz might bring to Anglophone debates.

Fear

Let me look more closely at the question of "fear". Not only does the threat of violence underpin the 'power of action', but 'instrumental power' is largely conceived of in terms of fear-inducing threats, the role of inducement by rewards pushed to the margins of his analysis. One is reminded of Machiavelli's aphorism, that it is 'better to be feared than loved', because others love us at their own discretion, but fear us at ours. I was also reminded of Vladimir Shlapentokh's book-length broadside against American social science's handling of the question of fear and social order, *Fear in Contemporary Society: Its Negative and Positive Effects* (2006). Broadly, Shlapentokh takes Parsonian-style social analysis to task for greatly overemphasising the role of consensus and shared values in the production of social order, and neglecting to appreciate the role of the state and fear of its power to punish. A sovietologist who left the Soviet Union, he was exasperated by a characteristic American blindness to this dimension of the causes of social order. Here again, personal biography has obviously shaped theoretical perspective in a valuable way. The fuller introduction of Popitz into Anglophone discussions of power might have similar import. A tradition of thought deeply imbued with the idea of a natural state of free actors co-ordinated by agreement could benefit from an infusion of Popitz's somewhat darker view of power, not as Parsonian consensus, but as the threat behind social order.

This focus in Popitz also leads to a very interesting existential argument. As killing is the 'ultimate limit' of power (p. 32), beyond which threats can push no further, it is the 'perfection of power'. The capacity to kill, when monopolised by those who rule, can instil reverence in those at its mercy, and the right to take life, even one's own life, must also be restricted to the powerful. But this points to what Popitz calls 'the antinomy of the perfection of power' (pp. 36-38), that is, once one is prepared to die, perfected power loses its force. This has been very effectively illustrated and argued by Christoph Reuter in his book *My Life is Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing* (2004). Reuter shows how the willingness to die for a cause short-circuits the logics of power and control. The same act which annihilates the actor's own power liberates them from the existential hold that the threat of killing has over them. Most power interactions are not at this extreme, but it is characteristic of Popitz's thinking to analytically seek out the logical limits of power action, as a basis to his larger theory.

Recognition

Popitz pays close attention to the psychological dimension of behaviour, often treating the hypothetical person as a paradigm for the analysis of action. For this reason, his discussions of authority (Chapters 4 and 5 especially) place a strong emphasis on the psychological needs met by authority relations. The Anglophone tradition, especially that which draws on Weber, has placed more emphasis on the criteria by which authority is legitimated (e.g. tradition, rational law), tending to isolate the psychological dimension

around the specific type of 'charismatic authority'. Popitz makes "recognition", and our need for it, central to his account of authoritative power. That we see ourselves through the eyes of others, and desire their approval and avoid their disapproval, is an insight that goes back at least to the writers of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as Adam Smith (1984), with his emphasis on human sympathy, the susceptibility to the feelings of others, as basic to human behaviour. This understanding flows into the sociological tradition through figures such as Charles Cooley (1956) and G. H. Mead (1934), with their emphasis on the need for mutual recognition. However, the emphasis in this tradition is on how stable and positive selves and identities are constituted, there is an egalitarian assumption running underneath it all – we all need recognition. For Popitz, the question of recognition immediately leads to the question of power. On one hand, authority, to be such, requires recognition as such (p. 79). But on the other hand, our general need for recognition is one of the things that make us susceptible to authority. In our searches for recognition, we adjust ourselves to the expectations of others, and especially to those who are powerful, and can bestow the most valued recognition. As Popitz puts it: 'Authoritative power emerges from bonds of this kind. It is exercised by one who consciously makes use of others' fixation on recognition in order to steer their way of thinking and their behaviour.' (p. 93) Recognition here is not just a requirement of personhood, it is also a vulnerability to power.

This aspect of Popitz's approach invites comparison with the sociologist Derek Layder (2004), who has analysed the importance of power for the formation of personhood and identity, but in a way that acknowledges that this may take either asymmetrical and abusive forms, or more balanced and mutually beneficial forms. He coins the term 'benign control' to talk about how personal relations inevitably involve degrees of submission to others, but in ways that are not intrinsically harmful, and are necessary for relations of, for instance, care. This suggests a less dark side to this level of personal recognition that Popitz doesn't seem to acknowledge, at least not very directly.

Domination (the few and the many)

Popitz introduces the next to last chapter with David Hume's classic, arresting observation of '…the easiness with which the many are governed by the few.' (1985: 32) Hume's point was that "force" is ultimately on the side of the many, so the few must have other means to achieve their domination. So, despite the analytic primacy that Popitz gives to harm, violence, threats, and fear, the point is that something else is needed to translate these into stable, institutionalised power relations. Through a series of analytical allegories of power formation, he isolates three principles by which the few can consolidate power over the many. First, organisation, co-operation, and solidarity among the few can give them advantage over the disorganised many, a point also made by Mosca (1934). Second, the possession and control of the flow of scarce and desired goods provides another strategy by which the few may regulate the behavior of the many. Finally, recognition appears again, in two guises. On one hand, the consolidation of power among the few involves horizontal acts of reciprocal recognition, mutual acknowledgment of a special bond. When the few recognise each other as equals, it enhances their collective superiority over the many. On the other hand, and in a quite

different sense, once an order of power has been established and become durable, it will itself become an object of recognition, an object of what Popitz calls 'basic legitimacy'. This idea is similar to what some have called 'performance legitimacy' (e.g. Zhao 2009), that is, legitimacy based not on the fulfilment of some formal criteria (representation, consent, rule-following) but on sheer efficacy in maintaining social order, such that the particular order of rule is the precondition for any more specific criteria of legitimacy.

In the final chapter, when Popitz addresses the history of power, its growth, institutionalisation, extension, and intensification, he speaks of how power 'congeals into domination' (p.165). His account very much parallels Weber's thesis of routinisation (1978: 246-54; 1121-1123), seeking to express Weber's view more precisely (p.166). He emphasises how, as societies grow in scale, the focus of power shifts from specific persons to the positions they occupy, how the procedures of power become more formal and rule-bound, and how power relations become more deeply integrated into the wider social order. Here again it is worth thinking about contrasts, but this time with Weber, who clearly is a foundational figure for Popitz in the German intellectual tradition of thinking about power. And indeed, there seems to be an effort here by Popitz to "fill-in" the quasi-dualistic tension in Weber between the power and authority of charisma, of the value-innovating individual, and the rationalised power and authority of bureaucracy. There is a sense in Weber that the primal source of power lies in the charismatic individual, from which bureaucracies first derive their power, in due course, replacing that power. Popitz very much follows Weber's sequence of growing complexity of organisational structure, with the growth of permanent offices, sets of followers, and the centralisation of command. But he elaborates the middle stages of this process in a particular way. First, he talks about how 'sporadic' power (what Clegg (1989: 211-18) has called 'episodic'), that is, exercises of power that are highly situationally conditioned, gradually become formalised. As he puts it 'The every-time-when formula gets, so to speak, superimposed on sporadic compliance.' (p. 171) Thus power becomes more standardised as norms, more a set mode of doing things, and less a demonstration of ability in the moment.

Secondly, he posits three archetypal power positions or roles, which, somewhat like Mann's four "sources", represent characteristic responses to fundamental power problems. The 'patriarch' emerges out of the problem of succession in communal authority and leadership. The 'judge' emerges out of the need for adjudication of conflict, providing a means to restore peace to the community. The 'military leader' arises in times of emergency, providing leadership in communal defence. These 'ideal types' echo Weber's concepts of 'patriarchalism' and 'patrimonialism', but also differentiate within them. At the same time, they by-pass Weber's idealised roles from his sociology of religion of the 'magician', the 'prophet', and the 'priest'. As prototypes, Popitz's three more clearly anticipate the functions of the modern state, whereas Weber's concepts tend to set up an antinomy between authority before and after the modern state.

All this is simply to say that while Popitz can be viewed as following in the Weberian tradition of ruminations on domination, within this he 'slices the conceptual cake' in a different way, with less of a fixation on the charismatic sources of world shaping ideas, and the stultifying effects of bureaucracy, and more focus on how power builds on existential vulnerability to harm, and beds down as institutionalised

domination. This may be indicative of lives lived in two different phases of German social history, with differing vantage points on that history. Be that as it may, making Popitz's vantage point accessible to a non-German-reading scholarly community brings a new perspective to that community, in my view especially in regard to the themes of 'fear' and 'recognition' outlined above. It is a very welcome contribution.

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